DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 233 078 TM 830 536

AUTHOR Howey, Kenneth
TITLE Teacher's Role/Responsibilities and Teacher Competence Testing: Future Possibilities.
PUB DATE Apr 83
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (67th, Montreal, Quebec, April 11-15, 1983).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Aptitude; Comparative Education; Competency Based Teacher Education; Educational Trends; Elementary Education; *Elementary School Teachers; *Role Perception; *Teacher Effectiveness; Teacher Evaluation; *Teacher Role; *Teaching (Occupation)
IDENTIFIERS *Teacher Competencies

ABSTRACT

This paper examines how teacher competence is related to the role-expectations set forth for teachers--specifically elementary teachers. Data descriptive of teachers today are reviewed. Factors which appear to deter highly competent persons from entering teaching are also identified. The paper projects even more challenges to a role often characterized already by an unreasonable span of responsibility. How instruction is delivered in this country is contrasted with selected curricular and instructional trends in other highly industrialized countries. The comparison suggests that more specialized and delineated roles for elementary teachers should be explored in this country and that competence be defined in more specific context and functions than at present. (Author)

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TEACHER'S ROLE/RESPONSIBILITIES AND TEACHER COMPETENCE TESTING: FUTURE POSSIBILITIES

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Kenneth R. Howey

University of Minnesota, Minneapolis

Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Montreal, Quebec, Canada, April, 1983

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Teacher's Role/Responsibilities and Teacher Competence Testing:

Future Possibilities

This paper examines how teacher competence is related to the role-expectations set forth for teachers--specifically elementary teachers. Data descriptive of teachers today are reviewed. Factors which appear to deter highly competent persons from entering teaching are also identified. The paper projects even more challenges to a role often characterized already by an unreasonable span of responsibility. How instruction is delivered in this country is contrasted with selected curricular and instructional trends in other highly industrialized countries. This comparison suggests that more specialized and delineated roles for elementary teachers should be explored in this country and that competence be defined in more specific context and functions than at present.

The emphasis in this symposium is on future possibilities in competency testing. The proposition put forth in this paper is that teacher competence is defined to a considerable extent by the role defined for and responsibilities assumed by the teacher. The most common teacher assignment is that assumed by the elementary classroom teacher. In 1980-81, there were almost 1,200,000 elementary teachers assigned to our public elementary schools. My basic contention is that decisions about the knowledge and skills upon which these teachers are assessed should be considered in the light of questions which address just what are reasonable and efficacious role-expectations. It may well be that determinations of teaching effectiveness in many situations are constrained as much by the nature of what these teachers are expected and attempting to do as by their basic aptitude and the pedagogical knowledge and skill they possess.

The following assumptions undergird the arguments I will set forth in this paper:

1. The modal elementary teaching assignment today is characterized by an unreasonable span of responsibility.

2. Expectations for these teachers--perhaps fond hopes would be more accurate phraseology--are not only extensive but often conflicting.

3. Current teacher assessments of the performance or "competence" variety tend to focus on process behaviors in the areas of reading and mathematics instruction without adequate consideration of other teaching responsibilities and the larger ecology of the classroom and school community.

4. Serious consideration and study of alternative conceptions of the role/responsibilities of teachers have been exceedingly sparse and embarrassingly unimaginative.

5. The current trends in initial teacher preparation, at least in terms of rhetoric as there appear to be no discernible operational trends, are for more protracted and expanded pedagogical curricula and apprenticeship modeling. Both of these arguments largely ignore the questions of what instruction should be provided elementary-age youngsters at various stages of their development and how this might best be provided.

What do we know about the elementary teacher today? A recent review of demographic data suggested this profile (Feistritzer, 1983):

> The "typical" teacher in our society today would be between 35 and 40 years old. She would have taught for 12 years and the majority of her teaching would have been in the district in which she is currently employed. Over those dozen years, she would have returned to her local college or university often enough to have acquired enough credits to approximate a master's degree. She would be married and the mother of 1 or 2 children. She would be white and, while not politically active, if she had a formal political affiliation, it would be with the Democratic party. She would teach in a suburban elementary school staffed largely by other women. (In all likelihood, the school principal would be a male.) She would have a class of approximately 25 students. Given her after-hours responsibilities, she would put in a work week slightly longer than the typical laborer, and bring home a pay check that was slightly lower. (p. 1)

A number of recent investigations have suggested a diminishment in measures of basic aptitude. Schlecty and Vance's (1982) findings underscore the concerns these inquiries have raised. In North Carolina

they found a negative relationship between how well students did on the verbal portion of the SAT and the percent of that cohort which decided to enter education. Schlecty divided the SAT verbal scores of all college graduates into five categories ranging from low to high. Only 12% of those in the highest fifth went into education, while almost 40% of those in the lowest fifth on the SAT verbal score decided upon teaching. Beyond that, only 7.9% of those in the highest one-fifth, whereas 28% of those in the lowest fifth, entered teaching. When these teachers were asked whether they intended to stay in teaching, the data is even more revealing as only 2.2% of those teachers in the highest fifth indicate that they intend to pursue teaching until age 30, while 15% of the lowest fifth indicate this to be the situation. While one cannot generalize these data beyond North Carolina, they nonetheless suggest that there very well may be a serious problem not only in terms of the level of competence of those who decide to enter teaching, but also in terms of those who pursue teaching as a career for any length of time.

In general, the level of student ability, as measured by Scholastic Aptitude (SAT) scores, of those choosing education as a profession is at an all-time low. As reported in The American Teacher (Feistritzer, 1983):

> Scores of college-bound seniors planning to study education in 1982 were 32 points lower than all college-bound seniors on the verbal portion of the test and 48 points lower on the mathematics section. Compared to the 36 possible fields of study that a college-bound senior could select, those who chose education ranked 33rd on their SAT scores. Only seniors intending to major in home economics, ethnic studies, or trade and vocational fields had lower verbal and mathematics scores.
>
> Thus, it appears that students selecting education are less academically able than their collegiate colleagues, and the situation is getting worse. Since 1973, those selecting education have scored lower on the SAT, but

> between 1973 and 1982, those students dropped 24 points further behind on verbal scores and 30 points on mathematics scores. The differences are significant, considering an estimated standard deviation of 104 on the verbal scale and 115 on the mathematics scale and the large number of students taking the test.
>
> Using estimated standard deviations, one can see that in 1973 58.8% of all college-bound seniors scored higher on their SAT verbal scores than did those intending to major in education. The equivalent percentage for mathematics was 59.5%. Those percentages have grown considerably. In 1981, over 60% of all college-bound seniors had higher SAT verbal scores than did those selecting education, and over 65% scored higher on the mathematics portion. (p. 56)

More than one-third of our public school teachers report dissatisfaction with their current role. Twelve percent indicate that they are very dissatisfied. Over one-third (36%) of the teachers in a recent survey indicated that they either certainly or probably would not select teaching as a career if they were able to begin over again. Only two decades ago, a little more than 10% expressed such extreme dissatisfaction (NEA, 1981).

That teaching is not as attractive as it once appeared extends beyond the perceptions of those holding a teaching license. In the annual Gallop Poll of the Public's Attitudes Towards the Public Schools, a question repeated each year is, "Would you like to have a child of yours take up teaching in the public schools as a career?". In 1969, less than 15 years ago, only 15% of the parents answered "no" to this question; as we entered the 1980s, a resounding 40% stated they would not want such a career for their children.

Data from a study conducted some 20 years ago further underscores the problem. Drumheller (1961) conducted an experimental study with over 100 secondary school counselors. He systematically varied records representing

elementary and junior high school aspirants in terms of scholastic aptitude, financial resources, ethnicity, and social class. His study indicated that the counselors were 24 times more likely to recommend students characterized by average ability, limited finances, and lower social and economic status to enter a teacher's college rather than a liberal arts college. One can only wonder what a replication of this study would indicate today.

This brief descriptive overview of our elementary teaching force, concerns about their aptitude, and perceptions of their role was undertaken to illustrate that there are clearly discernible changes in who is entering this vocation and that the events and conditions associated with these changes suggest that role modifiations are indeed warranted. When, and the extent to which, changes will occur is, of course, problematic.

Why is teaching less appealing for many, and why especially are fewer of the "best and brightest" apparently attracted into teaching? Salary is, of course, a primary factor. So is the matter of job opportunity. Perhaps the best way to assess the adequacy of income for the average teacher in 1981 is to contrast this salary with the annual cost-of-living as computed for a family of four in the fall of 1981. The U.S. Labor Department, Bureau of Statistics projects three figures: a lower, an intermediate, and a higher estimate in terms of three living standards. The intermediate living standard for 1981 projected a total annual budget of a little over $25,000. While the average annual salary paid teachers has always been below this intermediate budget standard, the extent to which it falls below the standard has continued to increase each year. For example, in the fall of 1971 the average salary of teachers was approximated to 90% of this

intermediate standard but had eroded to only 75% by the fall of 1981 (NEA, 1982).

In 1980-81, the average beginning teacher's salary was estimated at $11,758. Beginning teachers fall considerably below most other graduates with a bachelor's degree. Teachers are, for example, paid almost $9,000 less on the average than the salaries those with an engineering degree can demand. They are, in fact, some $1300 lower than liberal arts graduates in general according to annual placement reports analyzed at Northwestern University (NEA, 1982).

There are at least three other major factors which constrain against high quality teachers entering into or remaining in teaching. The first of these is categorized here as working conditions. For elementary teachers, I characterize the primary problem as one of trying to be all things to all people. This posture has as concomitant side effects: over-extendedness, superficiality, fragmentation, impersonalization and frustration. Thus, a common tendency is to employ management and instructional techniques more consonant with mass production than individualized learnings. A recent survey clearly illustrates that lecture/discussion is the dominant instructional mode in classrooms today (Dearman & Plisko, 1982). These conditions are not only acutely apparent to teachers, but their omnipresent nature is hardly lost on those students who contemplate teaching as a possible vocation.

A second matter of critical importance is that of status, of which monetary reimbursement is a primary corollary. There are several other dimensions to this issue, however. Recall the esteem given at one time to the one-room school master or school marm. I was struck by a finding, or

perhaps more accurately, nonfinding, in a recent study of conditions in rural Minnesota. When respondents were asked to identify significant others in the community, not a single one of several hundred persons surveyed nominated a teacher (Donohue, 1982).

Finally, there is the matter of limited career advancement. The lack of diversity in elementary teaching roles especially and the very limited opportunities for career progression over time, especially while still assuming instructional responsibilities, need not be documented here again. This basic problem also speaks to the matter of financial compensation. If teacher salaries are not as competitive as they should be at the outset of one's teaching career, an examination of incremental gains over time by those bachelor degree recipients in other professions reveals greatly increased disparities over time.

Perhaps these conditions will improve. It has been suggested by some that the mission of our public schools will soon become more clearly delineated and delimited. I, for one, suggest that conditions today and in the near future argue strongly against this. Over the last quarter century, we have witnessed a pendulum swing to at least three different emphases in the school curriculum. From Sputnik in 1958 and NDEA I (we are now in what I characterize as NDEA II) and academic reconstruction, to the social activitism and proposed social reconstruction of the late 60's, to the emphasis on the whole child and emotional needs given at least token acknowledgement in the early 70's, and now to the "basics" again (?). These concerns which have surfaced at various times in our recent history have hardly been adequately addressed. They are sure to resurface and equally certain to be laid visibly at the doorsteps of our schools. The

metaphor is not so much one of pendulum swings, but rather a cumulative charge that more resembles a layer cake laid on its side.

In terms of elementary schools, then, the question of how to respond to this challenging agenda demands a much more serious consideration of how schools might be structured differently and the various role-relationships among teachers which might more adequately address these needs. To expect teachers with highly similar roles and responsibilities working basically in the same time frames, physical contexts and instructional modalities to respond adequately is, from this perspective, wishful thinking.

A brief review of how schools are organized, teachers' roles conceived, and curriculum sequenced in other major powers throughout the world can serve as a departure for needed dialogue on these matters. I am speaking here of selected trends in the Soviet Union, East Germany, the People's Republic of China and Japan.

- Each country is moving toward a 12-year program of public education. The school year averages 240 days, compared with 180 days in the United States; has a 5.5 or 6-day school week; and has a 6- to 8-hour school day. Time-on-task exceeds that of the United States on all grade levels. School vacations are short and dispersed throughout the year to minimize interferences with the learning sequence. Absence from school is minimal and is considered a family responsibility.

- Instruction in science and arithmetic begins in the primary school. For the first three years all subjects are taught by one teacher. Specially trained science and mathematics teachers take over instruction in grade four and this is the pattern through all remaining grades until graduation from the secondary school.

- Specialized study in the sciences begins in the sixth grade with courses in mathematics, biology, chemistry, physics and geography (earth science). These courses are required of all students. The courses meet one to three periods a week with changes in time patterns at different grade levels. Mathematics receives the most emphasis, followed by physics and chemistry. The time spent on these subjects, based on class hours, is approximately three times that of a student in the United States who would elect four years of science and mathematics in the secondary school. (Hurd, 1982, p. 9)

I submit that in this country, the most common 'professional' pursuit--teaching in elementary schools--can be accurately characterized at present as one of over-extendedness, non-specialization, non-collaboration, labor intensiveness, technologically bereft and without adequate forms and structures for career growth and development over time.

When this is contrasted with present, let alone evolving and future conditions which will improve our schools, the following role modifications appear in order:

1. More specialized and delimited roles for elementary teachers (these will call for more intensive and sophisticated training in discreet disciplines or subject areas). Hopefully, more attention will be given as well to how specific expertise can be gained in the promotion of social competence and psychological maturity as well as various forms of cognitive ability. I recall Harry Broudy's scheme of expertise in heuristics, and philetics as well as didactics.

2. More collaborataive approaches among teachers to providing instruction for youngsters. These cooperative schemes should be characterized by differentiated but complementary role-relationships. (The lack of authentic differentiation is what has constrained schemes of 'team teaching' in elementary schools to this pont in time.) On the other hand, just such complementary schemes of specialization have characterized many endeavors in other professions where major inroads in knowledge production and delivery have been made.)

3. More congruity between the state-of-the-art and the state-of-the-practice in terms of modern technology as it abets teaching and learning. (Information will increasingly be delivered efficiently and

cost-effectively by phone line, satellite, cable and shortly fiber optics and light pipes. How long before the omnipresent text is replaced by an equally omniprsent silicon chip?)

4. More well-articulated career patterns and growth options and alternatives over time. (Recently the Governor of Tennessee proposed a four stage professional path which departs radically from the certification system used in most states and represents the first statewide effort at an incentive pay system. This scheme has selected teachers proceeding through a hierarchy, including an apprentice stage, a professional teacher license, a senior teacher certificate, and finally, a select master teacher status with an accompanying 12 month contract and 60% increase in the state's base salary.)

In the original paper I prepared for the National Teacher Examination's Long Range Mapping Project, I elaborated upon the type of teacher competencies role changes such as the above will call for. These include more context- and goal-specific pedagogical training, skills in collaborative curriculum design, technological competencies and abilities to foster self-renewal over time. I will not expand upon these here.

Again, my intent in this paper is to underscore the cruciality of how conceptions of teacher role are related to conceptions of teacher competence. In no way do I intend to suggest that we should deflect from concerns about how teacher competence is evidenced in preparation for teaching or performance in modal classrooms today. It is imperative that further inroads are made here. Neither am I so naive as to expect radical change in the near future in either schools or institutions which prepare teachers for those schools. Nonetheless, dialogue about teacher competence

has largely ignored questions pertaining to the present scope of elementary teacher responsibilities, let alone how these may be appropriately and effectively amended. Hopefully in the future this paper will stimulate further dialogue in this direction.

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